

St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem

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Introduction

Jerusalem's Old City stands apart from other cities, marked by its unique character and sacred significance to the three monotheistic religions. It holds a special place in the life of Christ (peace be upon him), where He performed miracles, taught His disciples, and walked among them. The Via Dolorosa, the path Christian pilgrims follow to reach the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, winds through its streets, rooted in Eastern Christian tradition.

Christian holy sites are scattered through every alley of this ancient city. Jerusalem is the birthplace of Christianity, and while believers often agree on the key events of Christ's life, they sometimes differ on the exact locations. This diversity, rather than diminishing the city, has enriched its cultural and architectural heritage, weaving a tapestry of faith and history. The challenge of pinpointing these sacred sites lies in the fact that many were not designated at the time of the events themselves. Yet for those of faith, no argument is necessary to believe in the sanctity of these places.

One intriguing aspect of Jerusalem's Christian sites is how, after the divisions within the Church, various denominations sought to claim specific locations of key events for themselves. These churches, both local and foreign, developed new traditions, each establishing its own sacred spaces, especially during the long period of Ottoman rule over the city and the wider region. This competition for religious authority further deepened Jerusalem's complex and multifaceted spiritual landscape.

The study of the Monastery of St. Mark in Jerusalem compelled the researcher to explore its spiritual, historical, and religious significance within the Syriac Orthodox tradition. This endeavor involved a thorough review of authentic Syriac sources, many of which were not listed on the references page due to their overwhelming number. While these references frequently reiterated information about the monastery, they often did so in varied formulations. To enrich the research, the investigator relied heavily on numerous field trips, which provided firsthand experience of the site and facilitated candid discussions with Syriac friends. All photographs included in the research were captured by the

researcher during these visits.

The researcher was struck by the considerable interest shown by both foreign and Syriac scholars, particularly Americans and Europeans, who engaged in specialized studies or completed postgraduate theses focused on the site. The Monastery of St. Mark serves as the seat of the Metropolitan of the Syriac Orthodox Church in the Holy Land and Jordan, overseeing the interests of its parishioners dispersed across three distinct political entities: the Syriacs in Jerusalem, who face the realities of occupation; Bethlehem, governed by the Palestinian National Authority; and Jordan. This diocese, which remained politically unified until 1967, now sees its communities living under markedly different circumstances. Consequently, their aspirations and desires have diverged, even as they maintain communication through social media and meet in person during various religious occasions.

The Syriac presence in Jerusalem dates back to the first century AD, though their modern arrival in Palestine coincided with the end of Ottoman rule and the onset of the British Mandate, which set the stage for Zionist colonial settlement. Thus, like the rest of the local populace, the Syriacs endured the trials of the Nakba, experiencing the same hardships that have plagued the city for a century. The research is divided into two sections: the first examines Syriac literature concerning the religious and historical significance of the monastery, striving to depict the site as it appears today. The second section provides a concise overview of the Syriac community, with a particular focus on their presence in Palestine and Jerusalem.

Section One: The Syriac Monastery—Its History and Architecture

First: The Building of the Syriac Monastery of Saint Mark (Marcus)

Different Names

1. Its Location:

The Syriac Monastery is situated in the southwestern part of the Old City, along

Ararat Road,¹ at the junction where Al-Hasr Road meets St. Mark Monastery Road. Visitors can access the monastery via several routes within the Old City: through Maronite Monastery Road, opposite the Jerusalem Citadel; down Bab al-Khaleel Road to the right at the first intersection (St. Mark Road); by taking Souq al-Hasr Road and turning right at the first intersection; or from the Jewish Quarter Road (Chabad Road).

2. Historical Context:

The monastery is nestled within a historic neighborhood of Jerusalem known as «Harat al-Tabbaneh,»² where the Syriac community has flourished. This neighborhood is marked by its significance to the Syriac presence.³ According to Al-Aref, the monastery lies «in the al-Jawaneh neighborhood, situated between the Armenian and Jewish quarters.»⁴ The nearby Coptic Gate is located in the al-Sharaf neighborhood (also referred to as the al-Jawaneh neighborhood), positioned between the Armenian and Jewish areas, with the Church of Saint Thomas⁵ nearby and the Small Omari Mosque in close proximity.⁶

1 - Mount Ararat is positioned midway between Lake Van in southwestern Turkey and Lake Sevan to the northeast in Armenia. It rises majestically at the southwestern edge of the Ararat Plain, straddling the borders of Turkey, Armenia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. According to the Bible, this is the sacred site where Noah's Ark came to rest, 150 days after the flood that enveloped the earth. For more details, visit: (<https://bit.ly/3jzDFw>).

2 - Hassani, Osama. "Jerusalem under the Ottoman Empire." Turk Press, published on September ,2015. Accessed on December 2022 ,20. (<https://www.turkpress.co/node/5539>).

3 - Ahram, Mazen. «Harat Al-Syrians.» Akhbar Al-Balad, published on August 2020 ,25. Accessed on December 2022 ,20. (<https://www.akhbarelbalad.net/ar/5571/5/1>).

4 - Al-Aref, Aref. Al-Mofassal fi Tarikh al-Quds. Arab Foundation for Studies and Publishing, Amman, 2005. Third edition, p. 762.

5 - Mukhtar, Reem. «St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem: The First Christian Church in Jerusalem.» Coptic Gateway, published on April 2021 ,22. Accessed on December 2022 ,20. (<https://www.albawabhnews.com/4325924>).

6 - The Small Omari Mosque (video) can be viewed at: (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RIUUX6rqnl0>).



The Monastery Road reveals the entrance to the small Omari Mosque. The monastery is designated as site number 15.

3) Historical and Spiritual Significance for the Syriac Orthodox Community

The Syriac community regards the monastery as «one of the most important historical Christian monuments,»⁷ a testament to the various eras that Jerusalem has witnessed, from the first century BC during the Roman period to the present day.

A pivotal discovery that enriches this historical narrative is the Aramaic tablet from the sixth century AD.⁸ Unearthed in 1940 during restoration work on St. Mark's Church, this inscription in ancient Palestinian Aramaic was found about a meter above the ground, on the right pillar of the inner façade at the church entrance. Its solid stone composition has allowed it to withstand the ravages of time.

The inscription reads: «This is the house of Mary, the mother of John, called Mark. The holy apostles made it a church dedicated to the name of the Mother of God, Mary, after the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ to heaven. It was restored in the year 73 AD, after the destruction of Jerusalem by King Titus.»⁹

7 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, introduction page.

8 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, p. 5.

9 - Ibid, p. 6.

This significant artifact has been validated by the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem,¹⁰ as well as by the engineer of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. They affirmed that this church holds historical and archaeological value equal to that of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Church of the Holy Nativity.¹¹ The tablet's dating to the fifth or sixth century AD is supported by the distinctive features of the Palestinian Aramaic script, particularly the shapes of the letters «alif» and «ta.»¹²



Aramaic inscription

4) Religious Significance for the Syriac Orthodox Community

For the Syriac Orthodox, the monastery holds profound spiritual importance. According to their tradition, it stands on the site of «the house of Mary, the mother of John, called Mark,»¹³ who is mentioned multiple times in the Acts of

10 - During the era of the British Mandate.

11 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, p. 6.

12 - Syriac Orthodox Church (Aramaic), 2009, p. 6.

13 - Syriac Orthodox Church (Aramaic), 2009, p. 3.

the Apostles. Mark, one of the seventy disciples¹⁴ and one of the four evangelists who chronicled the life of Jesus Christ, has a gospel that bears his name. This connection places the monastery at the very heart of early Christianity, deeply intertwined with its sacred origins and mysteries, including its ties to Christ and His revered disciples.

The discovery of the Aramaic tablet in 1940 further enhanced the monastery's religious significance. The inscription confirms that the monastery is built on the foundation of the house of Mary, the mother of John, known as Mark. The fact that the tablet is written in Syriac affirms the monastery's deep ties to the Syriac Church. According to Syriac Orthodox tradition, the «Church of the Virgin,» which they believe is the first church in the world, was reconstructed in 73 AD, following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus. This sacred site, located on Mount Zion, is believed by Syriac Orthodox sources to be where the Last Supper took place and where Christ washed the feet of His disciples. Historically, the monastery served as the seat of the bishops of Jerusalem, beginning with James the Just, known as the brother of the Lord, until the fourth century.¹⁵ Since 1471 AD,¹⁶ it has been the seat of the Syriac bishops of Jerusalem.

Profound Spiritual Significance

The biblical events that transpired in this sacred place, as preserved in the revered traditions of the Syriac Orthodox Church¹⁷

The biblical events tied to this place hold profound spiritual significance, especially according to the traditions of the Syriac Orthodox Church. Fourteen pivotal events are said to have unfolded here, but this study will focus on the most important ones:

First, this is where the Lord shared the Mosaic Passover with His apostles,

14 - Ibid.

15 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, p. 19.

16 - Ibid, p. 20.

17 - Syriac Orthodox Church (Aramaic), 2009, p. 10.

announcing to them His impending suffering and death. Fifty days after His resurrection, during Pentecost, He appeared to them again, as the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples. Following His ascension, the apostles and believers continued to gather here. It was in this very place that Saint Peter, after being miraculously freed from prison, found the faithful praying for him. Here, newly baptized believers also received the sacrament of confirmation, and it was where the Virgin Mary (peace be upon her) was granted the secrets of baptism and confirmation by the apostles.

In 51 AD, the first Christian council was convened in this place, attended by apostles and elders. It is, therefore, not only the site of the Last Supper but also the momentous descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. Saint Ephrem the Syrian, a fourth-century poet, affirmed that the New Testament emerged from this small monastery, where the Lord abolished the ancient sacrifices and nullified false traditions. In its place, He established the Christian Passover on Holy Thursday, offering His body and blood to His apostles.¹⁸

This monastery is believed by the Syriac Orthodox tradition to be the location of the Upper Room of Zion. According to Boulos Behnam, who elaborates on this in his writings,¹⁹ the geography of the Holy City during Christ's time was well-known. The monastery stood on Mount Zion, stretching from the Citadel of King David and descending along what is now known as King David Street, possibly extending to Bab al-Silsila. During this period, the third wall—built by Herod the Great—separated Mount Zion from Jerusalem and Mount Moriah. The Syriac Orthodox Church holds²⁰ that the apostles' consecration of this place as the first Christian church attests to the profound events that transpired here, including the Last Supper and Pentecost. Though Christ and His disciples spent much of their time in Galilee, they came to Jerusalem only on a few occasions. Their residence was in the house of Mark, and Christ instructed His disciples after His ascension to return to Jerusalem, specifically to Mark's house—the site of the Last Supper—where they would receive the Holy Spirit and begin

18 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, p. 11.

19 - Ibid, p. 13.

20 - Syriac Orthodox Church (Aramaic), 2009, p. 8.

their mission of spreading the Gospel.

Christ is said to have inspired Mark to carry a jar of water²¹ on his shoulder, serving as a sign for the disciples to recognize him and know the time for the Last Supper in his house. After Saint Peter's release from prison in Al-A'das Monastery²², he returned to this familiar place where the believers were praying for him—the only place he knew well.

**Second: Architectural Study
and Description of the Monastery**

While the monastery lacks architectural grandeur or striking beauty, its simplicity and austerity imbue it with an air of authenticity and antiquity.²³ These qualities inspire a sense of spiritual awe and reverence. The monastery complex is composed of four main sections:

1. The external façade and entrance.
2. The internal courtyard, accessed through the main external gate.
3. The Church of the Virgin, located at the front of the courtyard, with two gates—one for men on the left (northeast) and one for women on the right (northwest).
4. The archaeological vestibule.
5. The monastery building, which includes a pilgrim hostel, a library, and quarters for clergy, situated to the left of the courtyard's entrance.

This study focuses on a simple architectural description of the first three sections, omitting the fourth. When referring to the monastery, we specifically mean these three areas: the external courtyard, the church, and the archaeological vestibule.

Historical Development

21 - In that era, the task of carrying was regarded as the exclusive duty of women. Mark, hailing from a wealthy household with servants at his command, could have readily assigned such responsibilities to one of them.

22 - Salman, 2022, p. 24.

23 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, p. 15.

of the Monastery²⁴

According to Syriac Orthodox sources, the monastery and the Church of the Virgin Mary were first built before 70 AD but were destroyed by the Roman commander Titus in that year. The church was rebuilt in 73 AD, as indicated by a stone tablet inscribed in the ancient Estrangeli script,²⁵ likely from the 6th century AD, suggesting further renovation at that time.²⁶ The monastery and church were again destroyed in 1009 AD by the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah, who also demolished the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other churches in Jerusalem.

During the Frankish occupation (1099-1187 AD), the church was rebuilt. What remains today is a Frankish church built atop the ruins of a Byzantine one, which itself stood on Roman foundations—the house of John Mark. The lower part of the building retains Roman and Byzantine features, while the upper section, with its arches and columns, reflects Frankish style. Though construction ceased at one point, restoration efforts began in 1728 AD and continue to this day whenever needed.

Third: The Monastery's Function and Its Historical Roles²⁷

Throughout history, the Monastery of St. Mark has served various roles. It evolved from an archaeological site to a religious shrine, and eventually became a monastery inhabited by monks dedicated to worship and spiritual guidance. Despite numerous renovations, the monastery has retained its original architectural simplicity and the timeless character bestowed upon it by past centuries.

I. Restorations According to Monastery Records:

24 - Syriac Orthodox Church (Aramaic), p. 9.

25 - The open or bold script, known as Estrangela in Syriac (ܐܨܬܪܢܓܠܐ), is one of the three Syriac scripts and is regarded as the oldest. The earliest tablet inscribed in Estrangela dates back to 6 AD. This script was primarily used to transcribe the Syriac Gospels, with the Peshitta Gospel, written in the second century AD, standing as one of its most notable manuscripts.

26 - The reign of (Justinianus (Emperor Justinian I) (527 AD-565 AD)).

27 - Boulos Behnam, 1962, pp. 19-15.

- In 1718, the monastery was in a state of disrepair. Restoration efforts, lasting until 1719, included repairs to the monastery's interior and exterior, the church's renovation, the opening of a school, the organization of an archaeological library, and the purchase of an adjacent house, which was later annexed to the monastery.

Restoration Timeline:

- 1738–1744 AD: Comprehensive restoration of the monastery, including repairs to both the exterior wall and the interior. A new, elegant structure was built, and an iron door was installed.
- 1792 AD: Further restoration and decoration took place, followed by additional works in 1840 AD. During this time, lands were also purchased and endowed to the monastery.
- 1882 AD: Another phase of restoration was completed.
- 1940 AD: Maintenance work uncovered an Aramaic inscription during the British Mandate period.
- 1958 AD: During Jordanian rule, six beautiful rooms were added to the monastery.
- 1961 AD: A new room was constructed, and repairs were made to two existing rooms and a corridor.

II. Restorations According to the Israel Antiquities Authority

(IAA) Report:²⁸

On January 24, 2021, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) published a report on the results of two archaeological excavations conducted inside the Monastery of St. Mark between November 2010 and January 2011. The investigation, led by Yehoshua Ben-Arieh,²⁹ highlighted the challenges in determining the exact date of the current Syriac monastery due to improper restoration work over the years.

28 - The Israel Antiquities Authority, Levi, Ron. «Jerusalem, The Assyrian Monastery», on date: 24.01.2021 Vol: 133.

https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=25884&mag_id=20%20%20%133

29 - Some of the foremost Israeli specialists and researchers in the history of Jerusalem and the Land of Israel have contributed greatly to the field. For more detailed information, please visit the website of the Encyclopedia at the following link: (<https://www.encyclopedia.com>).

The IAA conducted two excavation phases:

1. Outer Courtyard: Excavation near the northern wall of the church and the eastern wall of the covered courtyard, covering an area of 4 x 5 meters.
2. Archaeological Vestibule: Excavation under the church floor, covering 3 x 7 meters, reaching a depth of 4.5 meters. However, the excavations were hindered by unauthorized, unprofessional work in the 1970s,³⁰ when the hall was converted into a small church, and liquid cement was injected into the building's foundations. This led to the cement seeping into the archaeological layers, severely damaging the ability to distinguish and analyze them.

The first excavation revealed eight layers, spanning from the 1st century BC to the 20th century AD. These layers covered periods such as the late Roman era (2nd to 4th centuries AD), the Byzantine period (5th to 6th centuries AD), the 8th to 9th centuries AD, the 10th century AD, and later centuries. Despite the complications, several significant finds were uncovered, including pottery (jugs, pitchers, and lamps), coins (one from Nero's reign), ashes and burnt bones possibly linked to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, a seal from the 10th Roman Legion, and remains from the late Mamluk and early Ottoman periods. A grave containing the skeleton of a woman over 50 years old, dating to the Mamluk and early Ottoman periods, was also found.

The second excavation revealed five layers, dating back to:

- The early Byzantine period.
- The reign of Justinian I (552–565 AD), identified by a piece of plaster containing a nummus coin.
- The late Byzantine, early Umayyad, and Abbasid periods.
- Later periods, including the 10th century AD.

Summary of the Report:

The excavation results were limited by the small area explored and the previously

30 - During the researcher's interview with the library official at the monastery, it was confirmed that the building had been injected with substantial amounts of liquid cement due to sewage leaks. This intervention resulted in cracks throughout the structure. The municipality of the occupying authority undertook this work under the pretext of reinforcing the building's foundations.

mentioned obstacles. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that the modern church structure dates to the period after the 15th century AD.

The discovery of a woman's grave, along with the courtyard pavement, points to construction during the 15th and 16th centuries. However, a coin (nummus) from the reign of Justinian I³¹ indicates that there was a building on this site as early as the 6th century AD.

Although remnants from the 1st century BC and 1st century AD were found—likely related to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD—there is no evidence of structures built between that event and the Byzantine period.³² The report speculates that the presence of the «Seal of the 10th Roman Legion»³³ may indicate preparations for the legion's camp, possibly built on the western hill, as suggested by Weksler-Bdolah in 2015.³⁴

Fourth: Description of the Monastery's Present-Day Features

I. Entrance to the Monastery:

The entrance to the Monastery of Saint Mark is strikingly beautiful, with a moderate height and a stone threshold adorned with mosaic inscriptions in both English and Syriac, reading: «Syrian Orthodox Patriarchate.» Above the inscription is a carved lion's head, symbolizing the Evangelist Mark, presented in an icon crowned by a cross. Two vine branches flank the icon, representing Jesus Christ.

Above this threshold is a pointed arch, its stones embellished with pillow-like carvings, framed by two slender pillars. To the east of the gate, a marble plaque bears the inscription: «St. Mark's Monastery, the Upper Room of Zion, and the House of St. Mark,» denoting it as the first Christian church.

31 - It confirms the period to which the stone tablet is assigned.

32 - In contrast to the archaeological tablet's text, which verifies the reconstruction in 73 AD, the report acknowledged that its findings were limited.

33 - One of the legions under the command of the Roman general Titus, who laid waste to Jerusalem in 70 AD.

34 - An archaeologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority, he served as co-director of the Western Wall Plaza excavations from 2005 to 2009 and has been excavating in Jerusalem since 1991.

The gate itself is composed of two iron doors, decorated with intricate animal and plant motifs from the Gospels, along with a cross.

Note 1: The design of the arch closely resembles the multi-layered arches found at the entrances to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Arch of Mary, which are of Frankish style.³⁵

Note 2: Determining the exact construction period is challenging. Although the style is Frankish, it continued to be used during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. The researcher believes the entrance likely dates to the late Mamluk period, having undergone restoration both in the past and more recently.



Entrance from the inner courtyard

Entrance to the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate - Entrance to St. Mark's Monastery

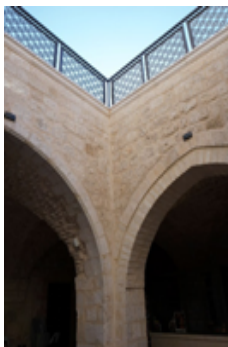
35 - Al-Natsheh, 2020, p. 71.

II. The Inner Courtyard

The inner courtyard lies within the monastery gate but outside the church building. Upon entering the gate, one steps into an open courtyard. To the east, a stairway leads to the monastery, the library, and a hostel for pilgrims and visitors. The courtyard is framed by cross-vaulted arches, with one vault on the western side and another on the northern side. A third vault, positioned internally, adjoins both the western and northern vaults, resting above the women's gate, which leads into the church.

Directly opposite the monastery's external gate is the northern cross vault, situated above the church's main entrance, which is the men's gate. This vault is supported by two massive pillars made of rectangular stone blocks, anchored into the northern wall of the church. It's worth noting that the arches throughout the courtyard are of the pointed arch style.

The courtyard and its features have undergone several restorations over the centuries, making it difficult to pinpoint the exact period of construction. However, based on the findings of the Israeli Antiquities Authority and the testimony of a monk who has lived at the monastery for 42 years, the original courtyard dates back to the 15th century AD, during the late Mamluk period.



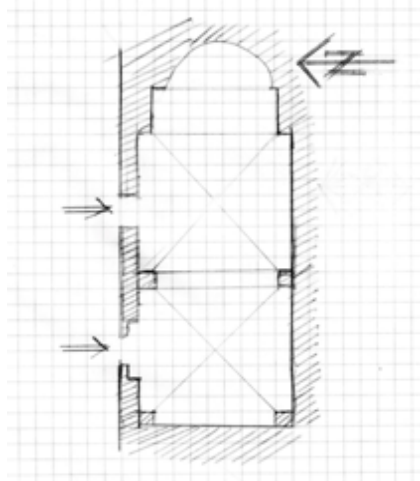
III. Layout of the Church of the Virgin Mary

The church features a rectangular floor plan dominated by a single central nave.

At the eastern end lies the sanctuary apse, crowned by a domed ceiling that stretches from west to east. This dome rests on two intersecting vaults and a semi-barrel arch that rises above the altar area.

The intersecting domes are supported by two rectangular stone columns facing each other, along with two additional supports located in the northwestern and southwestern corners. The eastern side is anchored by a semi-barrel dome above the altar, as previously noted.

Above the rectangular stone supports, elegant cornices grace the simple column capitals. The northern wall features the church's main entrance, adjacent to a stone support that holds the archaeological tablet. The researcher observed a simple chamfer on this support. Two windows are set high within the arches, mirroring two similar closed apses in the opposite southern wall—possibly former windows. Additionally, another window is positioned at the top of the western wall.



The architectural framework of the Church Hall³⁶

36 - A drawing by an architect who is a friend of the researcher. The researcher was unable to acquire an official plan of the building.



The upper section of the altar

IV. The Lower Vestibule (Crypt)

In the southwestern corner of the Church of the Virgin, a staircase descends to the first chamber of the lower vestibule.³⁷ This somewhat small room is commonly believed to be the location of the «Last Supper,»³⁸ as noted in various books and publications. Discovered in the early 1980s,³⁹ it was subsequently prepared as a space for prayer.

Since its discovery, the area has undergone several restorations, with the most recent one occurring in the very near past. Here, remnants of ancient walls, possibly dating back to the late Roman and early Byzantine periods,⁴⁰ can be found alongside various old artifacts and stones believed to be fragments of

37 - In his book (p. 28), Behnam states, “It (referring to the church) was demolished, leaving only the lower vestibule, where the apostles and believers gathered to pray and break bread.” The vestibule he refers to is situated on the lower floor adjacent to the Church of the Virgin and St. Mark, and it is the sole surviving section of the house of Mary, the mother of Mark (p. 32).

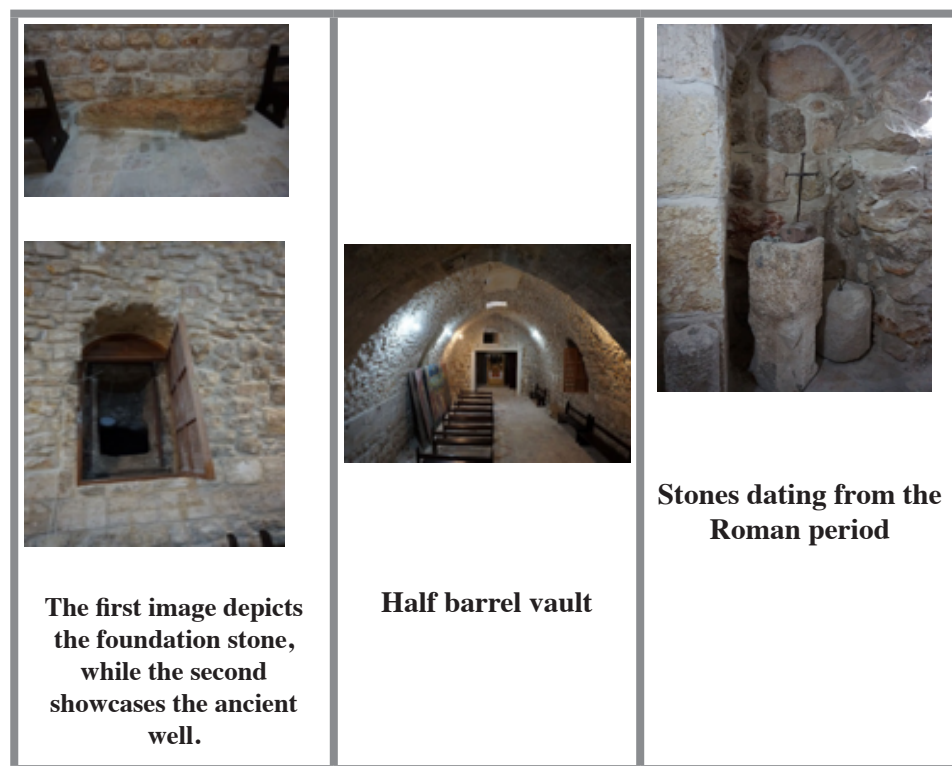
38 - During an interview with the father in charge of the library, he explained that the Last Supper occurred at this location (referring to the monastery), though the precise site remains unknown.

39 - In an interview with the father overseeing the library, he recalled the substantial amount of rubble filled with pottery fragments, which he believed was likely imported from abroad. He mentioned that the corridor Behnam referenced is situated near this room.

40 - According to the Israel Antiquities Authority report, particularly the analysis of the eighth and seventh layers from the first excavation, further examination is recommended. It is advisable to review the full report for comprehensive insights.

previous structures. A modern holy table and altar grace the space.

The vestibule leads through a corridor, parts of which may trace back to the late Mamluk or early Ottoman periods.⁴¹ Recently restored, this corridor opens into a beautiful, elongated hall with a half-barrel arch. The varied nature of the wall stones is striking, with some appearing to originate from the Roman period. Among the features that particularly captivated the researcher was an old well that the monastery had used in earlier times, as well as an exposed section of ancient rock, thought to be the bedrock of the original building.



Summary of the First Section

The literature surrounding the Syriac Church is notable for its emphasis on

41 - Drawing on insights from a Syriac tour guide and a subsequent visit with a Jerusalemite architect experienced in Old City restorations, the researcher noted the diverse architectural styles employed, particularly in the arches and vaults.

simplicity and the meticulous preservation of the site's authenticity, imbuing it with reverence and dignity. However, many of these references reiterate the same information, offering little new insight. Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to access the monastery library, which is rich in documents, yet found no scientific studies addressing the stone tablet, nor did the monastery publish technical reports on the various restoration efforts undertaken. The only technical report obtained was issued by the Israeli Antiquities Authority.

While the numerous restorations were significant, they gradually obscured the simplicity cherished in the literature, particularly in the outer courtyard and lower hallway, where the original beauty has been compromised.

This discussion does not delve into the religious significance of the monastery for the Syrians, a place that serves as a spiritual beacon for them, proclaiming their enduring presence in the city since the time of Christ (peace be upon him). They were among his first believers. Simultaneously, the monastery stands as a somber reminder of the massacres and persecutions endured by the Syrians, particularly during the Ottoman massacres (Sayfo). The Syriac inscriptions scattered throughout the site emphasize the importance and centrality of the Syriac language to both the community and the world, even as most of the new generation no longer speaks it.

Given its sensitive location and the rich tapestry of beliefs and history it embodies, this site deserves promotion and preservation as an authentic part of Palestinian heritage, both historically and religiously. Such recognition could enhance its appeal to domestic and international tourists, particularly those drawn to religious tourism.

Section Two

First: The Syriacs⁴²

Scholarly opinions vary regarding the origin of the terms «Syriacs» and «Syriac.» Many Syriac historians trace the name back to King Sours, an Aramean who appeared before the Prophet Moses (peace be upon him) and seized Mesopotamia and Syria. Consequently, this region was named after him, and its inhabitants were called Soursians. Over time, the second «S» was dropped, evolving into «Syrians.»

Before the advent of Christ (peace be upon him), particularly during the era of the Greek Seleucids, the Syriacs were referred to as Arameans, deriving from Aram, the fifth son of Shem, son of Noah (peace be upon him) and the great-grandfather of all Semitic peoples. In the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in 280 BC, the translators replaced «Aram» with «Syria» as a synonym. Thus, the name «Syrian» gradually supplanted «Aramean.»

As Arameans embraced Christianity, they adopted the name «Syrians»⁴³ to distinguish themselves from the pagan Arameans. This was particularly important given their strong attachment to their new faith, spread by the apostles, all of whom hailed from Syria-Palestine. Over time, this name came to encompass Christians from Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, India, China, and the Far East. By the second century AD, «Syriac» and «Syrians» became synonymous with Christianity. The Syriac language is also linked to the Antiochian Church, founded by the Apostle Paul in Antioch in 37 AD.⁴⁴ Wherever it exists, a Christian belonging to the Church of Antioch, regardless of nationality or ethnicity, is referred to as «Syriac.» Dr. Philip Hitti elucidates this, stating, «Syriac refers,

42 - Saka, Isaac. My Syriac Church – Part One. Publisher: Syriac Library – Aleppo 2006. Pp. 24-22.

43 - Issa, Hanna. (April 2014 ,22). «Syriacs.» Akhbar Al-Balad. Accessed December 2022 ,3. (<https://www.akhbarelbalad.net/ar/1089/5/1/>). In this article, Dr. Hanna Issa asserts that Greek historians designated the term «Syriac» to refer to the Arameans.

44 - Syriacs remain vibrant and active in today's world. For more information, visit Bethlehem Bible College at (<https://bethbc.edu/ar>). Accessed December 2022 ,22, at this link: (<https://bit.ly/3C6W6yd>).

as a religious term, to the followers of the ancient Syrian or Syriac Church, some of whom spread as far as southern India.”

In the Arabic language, there is a distinction between these terms: «Syrian» refers specifically to the inhabitants of the Syrian Arab Republic, while «Syriac» pertains to the religious context.

The Syriac Church embodies the liturgical and linguistic traditions of the Syriac community. The Syriac Orthodox believers affirm that the Lord Christ possesses a single nature, a stance that differentiates them from the Chalcedonians who attended the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD.

Throughout the first four centuries AD, the Syriac Church staunchly defended its doctrine against repeated persecutions by Roman and Persian paganism. It also endured the injustices inflicted by the Byzantine Empire in the fifth century and the Franks in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

With the Islamic conquests at the beginning of the seventh century AD, the Byzantine and Persian states were defeated, allowing the Syriac Church to emerge from Roman and Persian rule and enter the era of Arab Muslim governance⁴⁵. The Syriacs referred to Caliph Omar ibn al-Khattab (may God be pleased with him) in their language as «Farouk,»⁴⁶ meaning savior, rescuer, and liberator, in recognition of his role in liberating them from the yoke of Roman and Persian authority.

Second: The Syriacs in Palestine

The Arameans have lived in the Holy Land since the dawn of Christianity, with the Syriacs being among the first to abandon paganism and embrace the new faith. Evidence of this is found in the Bible, where some books were written in Aramaic, the language Jesus himself spoke—a variant of Hebrew spoken at that time.^{47 48} According to Al-Aref, a small caravan of Syriacs arrived in the

45 - Saka, 2006, p. 55.

46 - For more, see: Saka, 2006, p. 78.

47 - Nehme, Peter. (Interview, 2017/14/04). The Syriacs: Resilient and Enduring. Bethlehem Bible College. Accessed 2024/04/06. Retrieved from: (<https://bethbc.edu/ar/-السرّيان-لا-يزالون-موجودين-12/04/2017> (وبقوة)).

48 - Boutros Nehme. Syriacs: Resilient and Ever-Present. Bethlehem Bible College. Retrieved from Bethlehem Bible College website.

first century AD. Some later joined the Crusaders but left after their defeat by Saladin.

The first Syriac Orthodox bishopric in Jerusalem was established in 1471 AD, and since then, Syriac pilgrims have continuously visited the Holy Land, with many settling near sacred sites, particularly in Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Palestinian historian Hanna Issa notes that Christians of this sect began migrating to Bethlehem around 1838 AD. However, most arrived from Turkey in the early 20th century, particularly from the region of Tur Abdin.⁴⁹ This migration increased following the tragic events of 1915—the Sayfo massacre⁵⁰—when the Ottoman Empire targeted the Syriac people, leading to their widespread dispersal after losing their lands and homes in Turkey and neighboring regions. Unlike other Christian groups,⁵¹ the Syriacs lacked a political entity to protect their rights. Their ancient Aramaic kingdoms—such as Edessa (Turkey), Palmyra (Syria), Hazir (Iraq), and Nabataea (Jordan)⁵²—had disappeared in the second and third centuries AD, following the rise of Christianity.

Father Boutros Nehme adds that more Syriacs arrived in Palestine in 1922, purchasing land in Bethlehem, where they built a church in 1926. Today, there are approximately 1,500 Syriacs in Palestine, with 1,200 living in Bethlehem and smaller communities in Jerusalem, Jericho, and Nazareth⁵³. According to Ahram, Syriacs are the third-largest Christian sect in Palestine, following the Greek and Latin communities, with their population exceeding 4,000 people, as per an official Christian census.

Third: The Syriacs in Jerusalem

The Syriac presence in Jerusalem is concentrated in the Old City, particularly around the Monastery of St. Mark. Initially a guesthouse for pilgrims, the

49 - Issa, Hanna. (2014/22/04). The Syriacs. Akhbar El-Balad. Accessed on 2022/03/12. Retrieved from: (<https://www.akhbarelbald.net/ar/1089/5/1/>).

50 - Nehme, Peter. (Interview, 2017/14/04). *Syriacs: Resilient and Strong*. Bethlehem Bible College. Accessed 2024/04/06. Retrieved from: (<https://bethbc.edu/ar/وبقوة-وموجودين-لا-يزالون-السريان-12/04/2017>). “Sayfo”, a Syriac term meaning «sword» in Arabic.

51 - Catholics, Greeks, and Armenians.

52 - Issa, Hanna. op. cit.

53 - Publication date 12.04.2017.

monastery became a refuge for Syriacs after the Sayfo massacre of 1915, offering them safety in the alleys of Jerusalem's ancient streets. Over time, this community, distinctly Jerusalemite in character, has embraced diverse ethnicities and backgrounds, unified by their shared duties to the land and its people, transcending religious differences.

The Syriac presence in Jerusalem, while small, remains significant. It is not solely defined by the size of the community but by its enduring cultural and religious institutions. One of these is Al-Hikma, a religious magazine first published in 1914. Despite interruptions in its publication, it was revived in 1990 by the Syriac Jerusalemite writer and journalist Jack Khazmo.⁵⁴

The Syriac community has long organized itself through institutions such as the Syriac Orthodox Club, founded in 1922 to «care for the youth and prevent them from being lost.»⁵⁵ The club, which is an active member of Palestinian sports federations and one of the oldest in Jerusalem (for 100 years)⁵⁶, was restored in 2010⁵⁷ as part of the Welfare Association's Reconstruction Program. Its activities span social and cultural events, with a notable scout group established in 1950 that plays a key role during religious and national celebrations, proudly incorporating the Bagpipe, as Barsoum highlights in his writings.

The club plays an essential role in preserving Syriac identity, especially among the youth—descendants of the few dozen families who fled southeastern Turkey during the Ottoman massacres in the 1920s.⁵⁸ It also promotes the Syriac Orthodox Church's rituals and organizes seasonal and non-seasonal exhibitions, such as those featuring embroidery and handicrafts. The club hosts charitable and religious events that benefit both the community and visiting Syriac pilgrims from around the world.

54 - For more about Jack Khazmo, see: <https://natourcenters.com/> / at the link: <https://bit.ly/3I7wpRP>

55 - Barsoum, 2010.

56 - Pal Sport. (2022/03/01). «The Oldest Jerusalemite Club»: The Syriac Orthodox Club Celebrates Its Centenary in Jerusalem. Accessed on 2024/04/06. Retrieved from: (<https://palsport.com/article/48778>).

57 - Taawon Foundation. Website: <http://ocjrp.taawon.org/ar/> / On the link: <https://bit.ly/3WM6gfv>

58 - <https://alexshams.com/21/12/2015/syriac-christians-in-palestine-keep-hope-alive/>



2) St. Mark's Charitable Society for Syrians - Jerusalem:⁵⁹

Established in the mid-1920s, St. Mark's Charitable Society is a proud member of the Union of Charitable Societies in Jerusalem. Its mission is to support the impoverished, provide aid to those in need, and prioritize the education of the Syriac community. The society's headquarters are located within the monastery building. Since its inception, it has worked diligently to found the "Primary School for Syrians" on land near the al-Maskoubiya area, part of the church endowment. The school operated from 1926 until the Nakba in 1948, serving a co-educational student body of no less than 200. It offered instruction in Arabic, Syriac, and English. After the Nakba, the school relocated to the Old City, where it functioned in a rented five-room house from 1949 until the Naksa in 1967. One of the society's most remarkable initiatives is its housing project for the Syriac Orthodox community in Beit Hanina, a suburb of Jerusalem, on 13 dunams of land. Among its notable leaders was the late Jack Khazmo.

3) St. Mark's Monastery in Jerusalem:⁶⁰

One of the oldest monasteries in Jerusalem, St. Mark's was constructed in the first century AD, according to archaeological evidence and historical documents held by the monastery. This makes it older than the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built by Empress Helena in 313 AD.

Over time, the Syriac Orthodox Church lost much of its property in and around the Old City to other Christian denominations and, at times, to ruling authorities. Of the five monasteries once owned by the Syrians, only St. Mark's Monastery remains, serving as the seat of the Diocese of the Holy Land and Jordan. The other monasteries are:

- Al-A'das Monastery: Previously mentioned, located at Aqbat Nuns of Zion near the first intersection at Hosh Al-A`das, it is now in the possession of another Christian sect.
- Monastery of the Annunciation: Now transformed into Al-Bashoura Café.
- Monastery of Mar Toma: Currently functioning as al-Yaqoubi Mosque.

59 - Barsoum, Sami Musa. op. cit. p. 17

60 - Barsoum, 2010, pp. 21-20.



- Monastery of the Magdalene (Semaanite): Now situated in the Maamouniya area.

Beyond its religious significance, the monastery also plays a vital role in social, cultural, and professional life, serving as a sanctuary for the Syrians and their institutions. For instance, the daily “al-Jihad” newspaper was printed on the monastery’s century-old press from 1948 to 1951. Like the broader Jerusalemite and Palestinian communities, the Syrians of Jerusalem endured the hardships of both the Nakba and the Naksa. Many were forced to emigrate—first to Jordan and the United States after the Nakba, and later, following the Naksa, the «Syriac families of Jerusalem disappeared.»⁶¹ Economic devastation caused by the occupation, compounded by Israeli campaigns against uprisings, led to a relentless wave of emigration.

Barsoum vividly describes the injustice that befell the Syrians of the Old City under Israeli occupation. «This entire neighborhood was Syriac,» he recalls, gesturing from his shop toward the Jewish Quarter. «In 1967, when Israel took control, Syrians lined this street. They took everything—every house. Today, not a single Syriac remains.»⁶² Hundreds were expelled, their homes and shops given to Jewish settlers. The Syriac Quarter, once thriving, is now absorbed into the Jewish Quarter, along with many other Arab neighborhoods, leaving non-Jews stripped of their homes and livelihoods.

Israeli laws and procedures in Jerusalem, particularly regarding residency, construction, and daily harassment at checkpoints, disproportionately target non-Jews. Yet, despite these challenges, the Syrians of Jerusalem remain an integral part of Palestine’s rich cultural and religious mosaic.⁶³

The Syrians of Jerusalem stand out through their involvement in tourism—serving as tour guides and managing oriental antique shops—and their contributions to civil society organizations and embassies. They include doctors, lawyers, engineers, craftsmen, and professionals. Many have played pivotal

61 - Statement of one of the interviewees.

62 - Interview conducted by Alex Shams on: 2015/21/12. See the link: <https://alexshams.com/21/12/2015/syriac-christians-in-palestine-keep-hope-alive/> SYRIAC CHRISTIANS IN PALESTINE KEEP HOPE ALIVE AMID IS FEARS

63 - Statement of one of the interviewees.

roles in fostering growth within both the Jerusalemite and broader Palestinian communities, making remarkable contributions in health, tourism, travel, literature, trade, journalism, and education at all levels.

The Syriac Church holds several endowments, both inside and outside Jerusalem's Old City, notably around al-Anbiya Street, Jaffa Street, and al-Maskobiya. There is also a four-dunam plot of land in Abu Ghosh. A committee oversees these endowments, with the most recent one appointed in 2020.

The Syriac Quarter takes great pride in the «Syriac Aramaic Flag,»⁶⁴ officially adopted in 1980. Rich with religious and national symbolism, the flag's four stars represent «the four historical Aramean kingdoms» that once flourished in the region north of Syria and south of modern-day Turkey.⁶⁵ The flame signifies the Holy Spirit in Christianity,⁶⁶ while the red background commemorates the blood of Syriacs shed throughout history, especially during the Ottoman Empire's massacres. Yellow embodies hope, and the bird—either an eagle or a falcon—symbolizes the yearning for freedom, the desire to break away from a tragic past, and the aspiration to return to the homeland as a united people.



Syriac flag

64 - Website: <https://areq.net/> On the link: <https://bit.ly/3i82TB2>

65 - Rafidi, 2016, p. 166.

66 - Website: <https://areq.net/> On the link: <https://bit.ly/3i82TB2>

Summary of the Second Section

The researcher encountered a Syriac community deeply aware of the intricate layers of national, ethnic, and religious identity. Though they speak Arabic and live in one of the Old City's most densely populated areas, their neighborhood is adorned with Syriac flags, as if to declare, «We are both from here and from there.»

The researcher found no difficulty in conducting interviews, as the Syriac community was cooperative, open, and eager to share their story. Like other Jerusalemite youth, their young people face the harsh realities of occupation and strive to maintain their presence on the Holy Land, which they now form a part of, within the city's unique social mosaic. Community leaders work to improve the quality of life for their youth, fostering balanced relationships with others, yet emphasizing that it was the Palestinians who first welcomed them to this land, as Father Shimon remarked. Reflecting on the past, he noted that both the Nakba and the Naksa profoundly affected the Syriacs. Before 1948, their numbers were greater, and again, in 1967, they were more numerous than they are now.

The Syriac and Palestinian people share a history of resisting injustice, facing displacement, and enduring massacres. During the research, the author met a young Syriac man from Canada, originally from Syria. When invited to visit the Monastery of Mark, the young man, short on time, asked instead for directions to Al-Aqsa. He wanted to see the Dome of the Rock, threatened by destruction, and admired as one of the most beautiful Arab architectural treasures. From this, it was clear that his identity was firmly Arab. The need to strengthen ties between the monastery, the association, and the club is evident. Notably, the world champion in arm wrestling, Afram Zambil from Jerusalem, won the gold medal under the name of Palestine.

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engaging with the Syriac Mukhtar, tour guides, and a civil engineer working at the monastery. The research also included a phone conversation with a Syriac lawyer and an in-person interview with a cleric.